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Supporting Student Academic Writing Online

| By Cameron Lydster and Dr Shelley Kinash |

What do readers think first-semester university students or year 12 students would say if they were told they had to complete an online test to assess their academic writing? Perhaps a fair few students would say, "Why do I have to do this? Am I not at uni or nearly done school now?" Or in the case of non-native speakers of English, "I have met the language requirements; why are you testing my English again?" This article reports on what students at Bond University on the Gold Coast actually said about having their writing assessed, how students and staff benefitted from utilising an online task and factors to consider for those thinking about implementing something similar.

What We Did and Why

Since 2014, an online diagnostic writing task has been embedded in *Critical Thinking and Communication*, one of three core subjects at Bond University. The online test is a compulsory homework task worth two percent towards the overall grade for the subject and students complete it via the Learning Management System (LMS) of the university, Blackboard Learn. The main aims of the task are to identify students whose academic writing requires development and to then assist them in improving their written communication skills through one-on-one consultations, academic skills workshops and the use of online resources such as screencasts developed using Camtasia.

The test design is not complex. Students respond to an argument essay question with the instructions to "write an academic essay" and have one hour to complete the task. A countdown timer keeps them aware of how much time is remaining. Before commencing the task, students are encouraged to view the criteria and a short video with 'dos and don'ts' of academic writing. Once completed, students' writing is assessed and feedback is given, again through the LMS. For the students whose writing is below satisfactory, consultations

at Student Learning Support (SLS) commence as soon as possible.

What Students Actually Said

It was discovered that some students did ask themselves why they were doing this. However, they later reported realising the value of the process (and resulting support). In a focus group at the end of the semester, one student commented, "It did not seem like a good idea at the time; however, looking back, it was incredibly helpful." Another agreed, stating, "After I had done it, I was actually really grateful that I had because assessments started popping up for my other subjects and I was like, oh I actually know what I am doing." Other students expressed that it allowed them to gauge their strengths and weaknesses in writing in order to improve. International students from non-English speaking backgrounds were also pleased with the outcomes ("It made me more aware of how I need to write as English is not my first language"). Notably, all of the students participating in the focus groups expressed that their writing had improved. Areas of improvement included grammar, essay structure, cohesion, planning, presenting logical arguments, and formality. For several students, they perceived this as a "dramatic" improvement.

the writing task as a starting point

- illustrating specific and personalised strengths and weaknesses in academic writing
- identifying common issues and then following up with online resources and delivery of face-to-face workshops
- determining which students may struggle at university and, working with other key stakeholders, ensuring that these students receive the necessary support.

Factors to Consider

The following is a list of factors to consider when implementing a similar online writing task, whether it be for a particular class, subject or cohort of students.

Why implement an online writing test?

This is the first question to ask. For our purposes, we want to identify which students need support and, imperatively, provide those students support as early in their first semester as feasible. Not a lot can be done in week 13 of a 14-week semester, but students can develop their writing significantly if provided opportunities and support starting in week two or three. One student explained, "To let students know their writing levels in the beginning of semester will give students enough time to improve."

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Overall Benefits for Educators

From an educator's perspective, the main strength of the online writing task and accompanying processes is its timing early in the semester. Specifically, educators commented about the advantages of:

- providing personalised feedback through one-on-one consultations using

The question/s

Keep it simple. The want is for students' answers to be sophisticated, not the question itself. An example of a simple argument essay question is: *Laptops should be banned in lectures; do you agree?* If the task is to be embedded in a particular class and a significant amount of content has been learned,



a content-specific question could be considered. Take a marketing subject for example. An appropriate question might be: *What is the most important of the four Ps (price, product, promotion, and place)?* However, it is imperative to be sure that each student has sufficient knowledge of the topic, otherwise the focus is on content rather than written communication skills.

Incentive to complete the task

Many people need a tangible incentive to do pretty much anything. In our case, students who complete the task and, for those whose writing is considered below satisfactory and subsequently attend an appointment at Student Learning Support (SLS) for detailed feedback on their writing, receive two percent towards their overall grade for the core subject. It does not sound like much, but it has worked effectively. Students reported that they would probably not have completed the task if not for the two percent allocation. It can be important to incentivise and this helps to gain traction with the initiative.

Making the task meaningful

It is important that the task is more than just a stand-alone test. An international student clarified at what point the task became meaningful, stating, "I got a lot from, maybe not just from doing the test, but from all the (academic writing) information from SLS and... the personal feedback you get." Consider the next steps; what will happen for students who need additional support? What about students whose writing is satisfactory? The test itself will not help develop students' writing; it is what happens next that appears to be the most significant.

Providing feedback

Without feedback, what is the point of students completing the task? One student said, "I think feedback is very significant... We can know what we still need to learn, where we need to pay

more attention or how to improve writing." The feedback has to be accessible and should not be more than two clicks away from the task's site. When we first implemented the task, students were not checking their feedback; follow-up revealed their perception that the feedback was not readily accessible. Students simply gave up. Provide simple instructions for accessing feedback and consider allowing time in class for students to view the feedback.

Who is marking the task and based on what criteria?


Ideally, teachers with expertise in English language assessment would be involved in marking the tasks. Moderation marking sessions are strongly recommended, as this process allows markers to understand the assessment criteria, align their feedback, and improve the process. Regarding the criteria, again think about the reason for implementing the task. What aspects of written communication skills are the goal for improvement? The criteria need to be detailed, but avoid overwhelming students. In our case, we need something that assesses essay structure, how well the essay flows from idea to idea and, of course, sentence level grammar, spelling, and formal language.

It is a task not a test

We have made a conscious effort to call the test a task after several students stated that it created a level of stress because it was the very first piece of assessment at tertiary level for them. One student recalled, "I think I was a bit scared and stressed about it because it was like the first test that we had to do." To make it less stressful, it is important to focus and promote the idea that each student will receive feedback on his/her writing.

Make sure it works on all devices

As the task is set to be completed outside of class, students used a range of devices from PCs and iMacs to mobile devices such as iPads and other tablets. It is important to test the interface on a range of devices and do not be surprised if students complete the task on their mobile phones, particularly now that screens are getting bigger.

The task we implemented is a form of post entry language assessment (PELA). PELAs are by no means a new concept and have been used, in a variety of modes, in many Australian universities for several years. But why wait until post entry to university? It is worth considering utilising a similar task with students before they commence further studies, such as year 11 or 12 students planning to continue studying. Assisting high school students with academic written communication skills would lay the pavement for bridging the gap between secondary and tertiary studies and, furthermore, enhance employability. In their 2015 report, Graduate Careers Australia reported the results from a survey asking employers what they considered the most important selection criteria when recruiting graduates. Overwhelmingly, the top answer was communication skills. It is incumbent upon schools and universities to support students' development of this graduate attribute. 

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